

Automating Safety for a More Efficient Organization

By John Folkman and Tom Strasburger



Despite the challenges of understaffing, unfunded legislative mandates, and tight budgets, district support services departments are still expected to meet school systems' myriad non-curriculum-related needs. But the very nature of these services, even when they are focused on school safety and security, is so diverse and labor-intensive that department personnel are frequently pulled in several different directions at once.

School safety and security activities include complying with state and district safety regulations, managing diverse training expectations, and managing and following up on accidents or disruptive incidents. These and other areas collectively are responsibilities that district support service departments must manage to ensure that

school districts and employees are protected from unfair litigation.

How can administrators find the time necessary to develop and implement service and safety programs that accurately and consistently attend to specific district needs, much less sustain those programs over time?

A Matter of Time

More and more, schools are embracing the use of Web-based tools that simplify time-consuming tasks, such as generating payroll or managing student data, without any added burden on districts' computer systems or information technology departments. School safety is another prime area where Web-based tools can be beneficial.

SUPPORTING STAFF INNOVATION

Many district programs begin as top-down initiatives. That is, top-level administrators announce a new program and subordinates simply follow orders. Instead, administrators can allow supervisors and coordinators—those with more day-to-day hands-on experience at the building level—to take charge of assessing schools' and the district's needs and introduce suitable programs.

The Business Service Department for the Mayfield City School District in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, consists of four major divisions: Business Administration, Food Services, Buildings and Grounds, and Transportation. Despite the broad range of responsibilities associated with these four divisions, the district has managed to implement new cutting-edge programs by encouraging employee innovation.

For example, the district's building and grounds supervisor took the initiative in becoming involved in the green movement. He brought in environmentally friendly cleaning products and sought out federal resources for information and funds.

The food-service coordinator is adamant about reducing students' consumption of junk food and preventing the general use of food as a reward. She organized a Fun, Food, Fitness, and Family Night with consumer science and physical education teachers and community members; then she sought and received grant money to fund it. This event brings together area grocery chains and food, nutrition, health, and fitness experts, and offers a variety of informational displays, demonstrations, and health-oriented food and product samples.

Finally, the school bus drivers participate in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "anti-idling" program to reduce fuel costs and cut down on bus fumes being drawn into schools via the buildings' intakes.

—John Folkman and Tom Strasburger

Administrators continually struggle to find time to manage safety programs, staff training, incident reporting, student behavior problems, and workers' compensation claims. Individual schools often devise their own incident-reporting and behavior management practices, which results in inconsistent disciplinary practices and a lack of coherent data on which to base decision making.

Also, because of hectic workloads, district personnel often overlook follow-up activities, such as investigations, post-incident retraining (in the case of accidents), and other activities to improve safety and prevent future incidents.

One of the primary benefits of some automated systems is that they provide step-by-step guidance for follow-up activities and track task completion so employees don't have to think about what to do next. The systems also allow administrators to practice an exception management approach; instead of overseeing every step of a process, administrators take action only when the system reports that an action must be taken, when there is an incomplete task, or when exceptions to the usual process arise. In addition, safety committees or managers can use a system's automated tracking capabilities to analyze where and when incidents or injuries tend to occur to improve prevention measures.

Automating Safety Tasks

The Mayfield City School District (MCSD) in Ohio has been using Web-based software to automatically

communicate information about accidents on specific campuses to the appropriate authorities; to schedule drills and maintenance activities, such as recharging fire extinguishers; to manage and deliver online safety courses to its staff; and to standardize districtwide activities, such as reporting and following up on accidents.

Since automation worked so well for employee safety measures, MCSD addressed the issue of reporting student bullying and managing disruptive student behavior by beta-testing another software suite at one of its elementary schools during the 2008–2009 school year.

One major concern about automating safety activities is that districts must comply with different local and state regulations. As a result, generic safety software is of limited use to most district administrators. System vendors should be willing to work with districts and customize the safety software so schools have everything they need for compliance. MCSD had new safety programs and forms created and integrated on the Web-based systems to ensure that schools were in compliance with local, state, and federal legislation.

In addition, the district needed standard and custom online courses for its child abuse, substance abuse, and bullying policies. The custom courses included sign-off for staff so there would be a record of each individual's review and comprehension of various board policies.

MCSD now offers parents and students a confidential telephone and Web-based system to report problems, such as drug use, threats to the school, or bullying. The

district also plans to use the tracking capabilities within the system as documentation so that the district can prove that personnel took reasonable steps in dealing with each reported concern.

Results from MCSD's Use of Safety Automation

Mayfield City School District uses systems that automatically send notifications about scheduled tasks to employees or vendors at prearranged times to eliminate task-scheduling problems, such as staffers inadvertently scheduling a fire drill and a tornado drill for the same day.

The automated incident reports revealed an unexpectedly high incidence and prevalence of teacher injuries. When the safety committee took a closer look, they found that the incidents were occurring in special-education classrooms. With that information, the committee was able to work with specific groups of teachers to reduce the risk of future incidents and improve the safety of all concerned.

MCSD is required to post the number of bullying incidents on its Website. A major challenge was how to avoid under- or overreporting. Overreporting would alarm parents and underreporting would hinder efforts to ascertain the root of the bullying problem.

The first screen of the new reporting system software provides a definition of bullying, and users have to indicate whether the incident being reported fits the description. Users are then directed to procedures for addressing bullying or to another path for dealing with issues like harassment. Administration is immediately notified to address any and all safety reports.

Focus on the Big Picture

Relinquishing some control not only creates developmental opportunities for employees, but also gives administrators the chance to focus on the big picture rather than becoming bogged in minutiae. Changing safety programs for the better can only take place when administrators are freed up to spend time on broad trends and are provided with detailed reports using timely data.

Outsourcing management of safety programs can be an essential step in furthering the mission of individual departments or one's entire district.

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